

# One *Blackbird* at a Time

by Wendy Barker

Winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry  
Selected by Alice Friman

ISBN 978-1-943491-03-2, 84 pages, \$13.95 trade paper

BkMk Press

University of Missouri-Kansas City

5101 Rockhill Road

Kansas City, MO 64110

816-235-2558 [www.umkc.edu/bkmk](http://www.umkc.edu/bkmk)

Interview by Marie Mayhugh

**Q.** As I read *One Blackbird at a Time*, I noticed English pedagogy as a common theme, and the introductory poem “I Hate Telling People I Teach English,” brought to mind how much I hate telling people that I, myself, majored in English because of the common response you weave into this poem, “. . . all that grammar, you won’t like the way I talk, you’ll be correcting me.” Have you considered this response to English majors and professors may have originated from negative grammar school experience? Also, do you anticipate that English majors will respond as I did?

**A.** This poem grew out of years—no, decades!—of experiences, mine and others. It may have been talking with my sister Trisha McConnell, an animal behaviorist, that lit the fuse. She had been telling me how, when taking her dogs and cats to vets, she would of course be charged, whereas those same medical practitioners would ask her advice for behavioral problems with their pets, expecting her to share her professional knowledge for free. I often find that after I’ve read this poem to audiences, people from various other fields will come up afterward and say they keenly relate to the poem. But certainly English majors and teachers will identify most directly with “I Hate Telling People I Teach English.” And I wouldn’t be at all surprised if the common negative reactions from the general public to those of us majoring in or teaching English stem from a certain kind of teaching in elementary, middle, and/or high school, which is sad indeed.

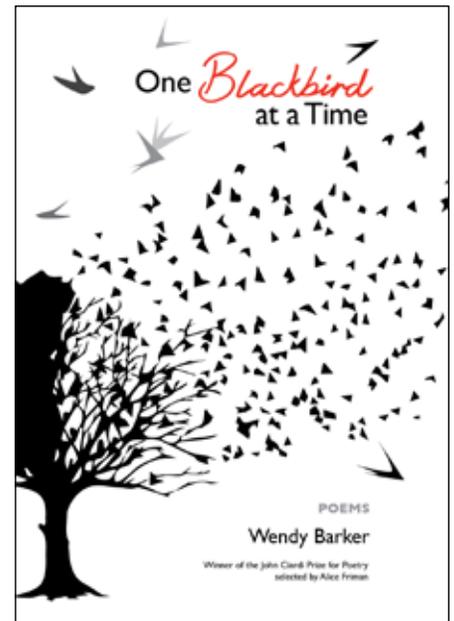
I must add, too, this is the only time I’ve ever actually laughed out loud while drafting a poem. It felt absolutely cathartic to write this one.

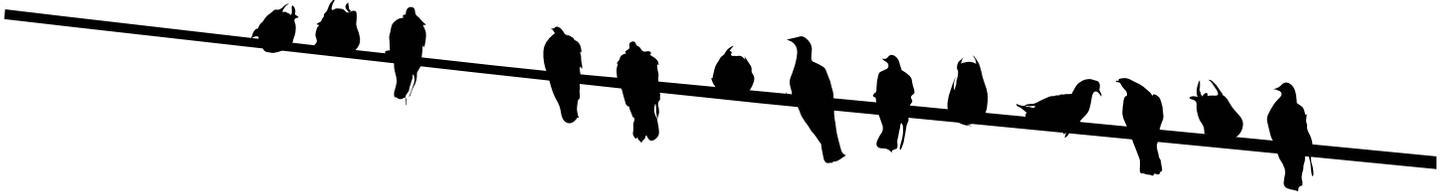
And the poem obviously touches a nerve with many others—I often end poetry readings with “I Hate Telling People I Teach English,” which always brings gratifying responses ranging from chuckles to loud guffaws.

**Q.** I had a poetry professor once say that some students needed therapy before taking a poetry workshop because the poetry workshop turned into a therapy session. In the poem, “Truth, Beauty, and the Intro Poetry Workshop,” you write, “Now he’s turned in a free-verse sequence leaded / with expletives about arguments / his crack-dealing brother who never leaves the house without / his .38.” Where do you draw the line between art and therapy?

**A.** Creative writing workshops are very delicate situations. My main goal in a workshop is to establish a safe, nurturing environment so that students feel free to write. But your question is a difficult one to answer. I’m always thrilled when a student finds a way to voice something painful that has been choked off before, muffled. Yet a poem has to work, and work *as a poem*. If a poem lacks attention to vivid language, to sound, imagery, and form, then it’s not a poem. So a poetry workshop is not a place simply to spew, or to work through past traumas. Certainly it can be helpful to use writing as a way to heal. But I always stress that our goal is to write (and revise, and revise, and revise) drafts that become effective works of art—poems. We’re also careful to refer to a poem’s speaker, never assuming that the “I” of a poem is the writer. And I do everything I can to ensure that our workshop space is kind and supportive—even though kindness and support can mean our making detailed and numerous suggestions for revision.

**Q.** I was hooked by the poem’s title, “On Teaching Too Many Victorian Novels in Too Short a Space of Time During Which I Become,” and its first-line enjambment, “Stuffed, like a twenty-pound turkey. . . .” Its continuous thought delivers layered meaning if we consider the modern world to be as “stuffed” as a Victorian narrative. These particular lines convey the crowdedness of our lives,





“. . . when those English villages didn't hold as many people as I pass / on the interstate in fifteen minutes or dodge at the mall the day after Thanksgiving / or slump down with at the gate waiting for the delayed flight or stare at on CNN / or MSNBC in a hour, surfing through head after talking head, each expounding / to me lounging on my couch as though we were all seated around a mahogany table / loaded with glistening plate and leaded goblets, embossed napkins, and candelabras . . . .”

Do you feel that at times our world is too hectic to enjoy reading literature? Or at other times too complacent with social media to bother reading literature?

A. Yes to both! We're so distracted, so frazzled, so connected to so many external stimuli that we're actually disconnected! With all our “devices,” with reams of information bombarding us constantly, certainly the ability to relish—to take the time for—novels and poems can be lost. I think of Pound's lines in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”: “The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace . . . . Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries / Of the inward gaze; / Better mendacities / Than the classics in paraphrase!” And yet, if the dozens of journals to which I subscribe, and the books published in our country alone are indicators of anything, it sure seems that the literary arts are alive and well. I also think of the hunger our students exhibit for fiction and poetry in (at least in upper-division and graduate) literature classes, and in the poetry workshops, where I require reading of eight to ten full-length poetry collections each semester. And at poetry readings: it's obvious people are still hungry for “the word,” and still respond when the words are alive, when they sparkle, bounce into a room with muscle and grit.

Q. In your poem, “I Said it Would Be,” you mention discussing *Little Women* in class, and how a student, Claudia, claims she liked the way Winona Rider wore Converse high-tops in the film, and how everyone agreed Susan Sarandon was not ideal for Marmee. When I read this I immediately thought of Jonathan Franzen's essay “Perchance to Dream,” in which he discusses the problem with literature simultaneously existing with Hollywood. If students identify with novels adapted to film through

the actors, how do you think that expands or limits their appreciation of literature?

A. Often I find that, if I've loved a novel, I won't enjoy any film production of the book. People often argue over whether it's best to see a film based on a novel before reading the book, or better to read the novel first. Though I saw the movie version of *The English Patient* before reading the novel, and, actually, loved both, I've never been happy with film attempts to treat Woolf's brilliant *Mrs. Dalloway* cinematically.

In our class discussion of *Little Women*, the fact that some students had seen the film version with Susan Sarandon helped jump-start our discussion of Alcott's 19th-century novel. I think it's helpful if we remember that the two media are utterly different. A novel can be a great one, and a film may be great too, even if it drifts considerably from the book upon which it's based.

Q. The poem “Waking Over *Call it Sleep*” regards the quiet mention of ancestral origins and name-calling. The line, “. . . her granny was a Jew since nobody knew / her origins and everybody talked as if something had been / hushed up, shameful. . . .” Why, in this time when we see Ancestry.com's popularity exploding, does this issue of heritage hold such fascination, and even, at times, anxiety?

A. But I wonder if this is a new fascination? Haven't we always—as human beings—been curious about our ancestry? I know my American grandmother talked a great deal to me about her grandparents and their history. Perhaps the fact that we can learn more about ourselves and our ancestors through Ancestry.com and the internet causes it to seem as though we're more fascinated than earlier generations. I'm wondering if, as a species, we haven't always wanted to know about who came before us and why. And how the backgrounds—and stories—of those forebears affect us in our own time, how they have shaped us. I think of the importance of tribal peoples' stories of ancestors, often even rooted to and connected with particular places, trees, mountains, streams. The poems I've been writing over the past two–three years deal with my mother's unusual history, a subject that has always fascinated my sisters and me. I think of Faulkner's famous quote: “The past is never dead. It's not even past.”

